

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity

An alternative to the competition State

Rendtorff, Jacob Dahl

Published in:
Nordicum - Mediterraneum

Publication date:
2017

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Rendtorff, J. D. (2017). Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: An alternative to the competition State. *Nordicum - Mediterraneum*, 12(1).

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact rucforsk@kb.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity - An alternative to the competition State

Our times have been characterized as a post-political age at the end of history^[1], where all political ideologies are dead and economic prioritization according to utility-maximization in the neoliberal competition state has become the only purpose of political decisions. The citizen of modern welfare society has become a work and consumption man that is not interested in the common good of community, but only wants to satisfy individual and often opportunistic preferences. At the same time modernity is characterized by wars and catastrophes (Holocaust, Yugoslavia and more recently Iraq and Syria) where the desire of power by tyrants lead to great suffering and unhappiness. On this basis of this perplexity of politics, the conservative Jewish, German and American philosopher Leo Strauss (1899-1973) proposes an interpretation of the causes of the crisis of modernity and argues that the only way in which we can reestablish social stability is to go back to classical political philosophy by Plato and Aristotle. In the following, I will introduce thought of Leo Strauss in order to show how we here can find a well-qualified concept of political conservatism. It is however clear, that this intellectual aristocratism is different from dominant conservative at the political right that also can be accused of having reduced politics to economics and utility maximization where focus is on promotion of personal privileges and interests rather than a concern for the common good in a strong political community.

A critique of radical conservatism

At the same time as he wants to distance himself from the contemporary conservative ideology, we can consider Strauss' philosophy as a criticism of radical conservatism that in our time has resulted in Nazism and fascism. According to Strauss tyranny and totalitarianism, represent a disturbing consequence of the modern break-through of political thought by Machiavelli and Hobbes where politics is no longer concerned with the common good, but has become power politics in order to secure the privileges of the ruling tyrants and supporting classes.

This criticism of the radical conservatism is closely related to Strauss' own lives. He grew up in a middle-class Jewish home in Hamburg and completed in 1922 his doctorate in a Neo-Kantian university environment. In the late 1920s, he was in Berlin and worked on a book about the Jewish philosopher Spinoza's critique of religion. In this regard, began his political philosophy to take shape in a showdown with the famous Catholic-conservative constitutional theorist Carl Schmitt who, later for a short period (1934-35) was to become Hitler's crown jurist and main ideologist. Schmitt had several times after Strauss-depth comments revised his work *On the concept of the political*.^[2] At the same time, Schmitt helped paradoxically Strauss to escape from Nazism by making sure that he in 1932 was awarded a scholarship to first study in Paris and later in Cambridge. It was later the start of

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity - An alternative to the competition State

Strauss' career in Anglo-Saxon political science where he after immigration to the United States, as a professor at the University of Chicago came to found a school of political philosophy. Moreover, he influenced several generations of American political scientists to be interested in the political philosophy classics instead of election research, "rational choice" theory and utilitarianism, disciplines that were on the top of the American political science. That Strauss' influence is enormous proves an opinion of the philosopher Stephen Toulmin, who complained that the US Government had several employees who knew more about Plato and Aristotle, than they knew about empirical political science.

The dialogue between Strauss and Schmitt continued for some years after that Strauss had moved abroad. We can say that this discussion between the young unknown Jew and the famous Nazi law professor, who even stated that Strauss was the only one who really understood his philosophy, shows how Strauss on the one hand shares Schmitt's diagnosis of liberalism crisis, but at the same time will find another way out of this than Schmitt's power politics. Schmitt defines the political as the choice of the enemy and, which accordingly, is the choice of the aim of one's own life, because we have something to believe in. The political involves the permanent possibility of war. Schmitt sees liberalism in a Nietzschean perspective as a concept of the political which is doomed in a world where slaves have triumphed where people no longer have obligations and do not fight for their ideals and recognition, but simply are pursuing their own goals in a general nihilistic atmosphere. Schmitt was extremely concerned about the increasing fragmentation of the Weimar Republic's social order as a threat to the state, because there was no empowered central body to ensure the political sovereignty of the state.

In fact, Thomas Hobbes' notion that people let themselves subordinate the sovereign's power to prevent the condition of unlimited war in the natural condition reflects a theoretical anti politics because he wants to avoid hostility by replacing the natural condition by a universal and homogenous state. Schmitt maintains instead that politics is defined by having enemies and he has no alternative to the liberal protection thinking other than power politics. He puts the permanent battle mode against Hobbes' attempt to civilize the state of nature. This means, according to Strauss that Schmitt cannot avoid being a Nazi. For Carl Schmitt, the political legitimate sovereign is the one who has the strongest will and can seize the leadership position in society and thereby realize its set of core values based on the will and decision. For such a decisionistic political theology liberalism is the real enemy, because it dissolves religion and ideals of value pluralism and will not recognize politics as a struggle for absolute beliefs.[\[3\]](#)

Strauss puts his political philosophy up against Schmitt's political theology. Unlike value-nihilism and power politics, he wants to go back to the perception of the political in the

classic tradition of Plato and Aristotle as an alternative to liberalism's dissolution of the concept of politics.

A Socratic quest for the best political regime

Strauss' systematic position is hidden in a jumble of interpretations and comments to the Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions in political philosophy. According to Strauss is a hermeneutics that aims to reconstruct the historical conditions of work a type of text explanation that is not true to the author's message.^[4] The consequence is that you do not get hold of the work's real meaning, the esoteric saved opinion. There is always a political-philosophical text because the author has often been politically persecuted and therefore have not been able to present his or her opinion directly, but could only write for a select elite of smart aristocrats who in contrast to the vulgar mob could break through text's surface and decipher its esoteric meaning.^[5]

When Strauss defines interpretation doctrine as a reconstruction of the author's original intention it is a problem, how he can avoid falling back into a subjectivist hermeneutics, where you will do the impossible by looking for the author's psychology behind the work. This problem is solved by defining the author-intent as a meaningful whole in the work that can be deduced taking into account the esoteric terms of the production of the work. Meanwhile, Strauss' position becomes an archeology in the sense that it comes to reconstruct the true message that has been forgotten by previous interpreters. The text of the past is a true mystery for the reader. The starting point of hermeneutics is ignorance, finality and interpret the certainty of their own prejudices, and thinking about past non-historicity must be understood on its own terms within the historical understanding of the text.^[6]

Against this background Strauss defines the goal of political philosophy as to arrive at the proper nature of the case in relation to the whole. The starting point for reflection may be man's participation and allegiance to the state. The understanding of man as a political animal comprehends the (city) state as a whole. To think politically is to think the "Politeia", the "best regime" by fitting the nature of man in relation to the whole (The Whole). This concept of wholeness is not determined as a totality in the Hegelian sense and not as a definition of man as a part of the cosmos.^[7] Strauss believes that it is wrong to understand the classic natural law and the Greek political thinking as based on the participation of man in a cosmic whole. Therefore, classical political philosophy cannot be accused of running an outdated cosmology. The whole does not imply a particular cosmological reference. Rather it should be interpreted as the logos that connects man and the state. But at the same time, to think the concept of a whole in Strauss' political thinking seems to go beyond the concept

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity - An alternative to the competition State

of logos, because logos is often defined in the cosmology that political thinking rejects. Strauss emphasizes the phenomenological and pre-philosophical base that characterizes the classical political philosophy when it comes to describing the political phenomena as they appear in man's everyday political reality.[\[8\]](#)

In this way, the concept of the whole receives nature a basal function in Strauss' view of politics. The concept of nature refers to the expression of the human soul and its relationship to the whole. The aim is to understand the policy limits and the difference between the best political regime and the here and now real possible state. The practical State of factual politics varies according to time and place. The form of the state depends on the particular circumstances and problematize whether there really is an Eidos for all states. The political reality of the state in practical political life means that the state's idea is used differently in different states, so the notion of the best regime must be seen in relation to the particular circumstances of a specific political reality.

Thus, the philosophy of the best regime represents an alternative to historicism and power politics. The modern historicism argues that political regimes are nothing, but functions of ideological power relations and that there cannot exist an idea of the best state. Strauss believes that historicism is an expression of modernity's oblivion of absolute values and that it nullifies itself because to assert that everything is historic in itself is a universal statement that require a trans-historical truth. Historicism contains an internal contradiction and therefore cannot counter Strauss' project to find the good as the natural order of the best regime.[\[9\]](#)

To describe the political *Eidos* as the best regime also implies the abolition of the distinction between "facts" and "value". The point is to show how political thought cannot work with this distinction and how the normative and descriptive are mixed in any theory of politics. Although Weber's sociology, for example, can be value free, it is in itself a normative position to say that sociology should not have normative assumptions.[\[10\]](#) It is in itself a normative position to claim that sociology is value-free. Even science without values is based on values. Therefore, all political thought is normative science.[\[11\]](#)

Strauss illustrates the task of philosophy with reference to Plato's cave image: philosophizing, it is to get from the darkness of the cave into the light of day, ie the world of truth and cognition as opposed to the confused sense world in the cave.[\[12\]](#) In this way, Strauss' philosophy is essentially a Platonic and Socratic mode of thinking. The separation between the state's idea and the actual political reality remains a real possibility because the philosopher tend to seek world of ideas outside the cave, while the general state policy decisions are determined by rhetoric, power and subjective opinions. The truth about the

political is obtained through the Socratic communication, a maieutic dialogue that modestly will rediscover the eternal ideas and philosophical realization of the political. Nevertheless, it is also facing the difficulty of realizing the political truth confronted with the variety of opinions in the actual political life.

The tension between City and Man

The basis of classical political thought is, according to Strauss the bond between man and the state and the notion that the state should be a good for man. It is also important to be aware of the limits in the relationship between man and state. In reality, the classical political philosophy shows that the ideal of the state's perfect utopia can hardly be reconciled with human nature.

In his reading of Plato's *Republic* Strauss shows how the philosophical man, despite the fact that he must be a philosopher-ruler in fact come into conflict with the state.[\[13\]](#) He would not be king, but would rather withdraw from the government to sacrifice himself for the wisdom and contemplation of the eternal ideas.[\[14\]](#) There is also no room for eroticism and poets in the ideal state and so the paradox is that the ideal state excludes what is very human and the humanness of humanity. Plato's dialogue universe must be seen as an ironic and dialectical universe that juxtaposes different positions to emphasize the complexity of being.[\[15\]](#)

The ironic elements of the State in *the Republic* proves that the attempt to think the completely just, fair, ideal regime is contrary to human nature. This is because a state that is only conceivable after the idea of justice must isolate everything that is specifically human; Eros and poetry and also in the fact that the philosophers who are not interested in politics, but live for philosophical wisdom, suddenly have to rule in the ideal state. This original interpretation is in contrast to many modern interpretations of Plato's philosophy.[\[16\]](#)

Plato is in many interpretations considered an authoritarian thinker that will make the philosophers to dictators and destroy the possibility of public opinion and democratic dialogue about the state's future because philosophers are the only ones making the decisions. Therefore, the ideal state is changed into tyrannical totalitarianism. In addition, Plato was described by many interpreters as initiator of political idealism that had fatal and terrorist implications in modern society, for example in the form of Nazism, communism and fascism. Literally, the ideal state is also a representation of all the horrifying elements of utopia where citizens are sacrificed to state rationality and utility interests. The social classes are divided according to labor and natural capacity. Warriors, workers and

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity - An alternative to the competition State

merchants have each their function and philosophers then determines sovereignly, what is the best and most practical thing to do according to the idea of justice.

The irony of the fact that the regime envisaged by the idea of justice becomes an inhuman dictatorship shows that political philosophy cannot ignore human nature's lack of perfection and arbitrariness by the historical situation. Strauss says that *the Republic* is the most profound analysis ever of the impossibility of political idealism and that the ideal state is impossible because it is contrary to the nature of the case and the whole.^[17] The esoteric and ironic truth that lies behind the rhetorical game in Plato's *Republic* is that a regime that is thought abstractly according to the idea of justice cannot overcome the fundamental tension between man and city. This tension between humans and the state, Eros and justice, philosophy and the real case of the political facticity continue to persist because the nature of facticity is not the same as the ideality of the world of ideas. Thinking about the best regime must not follow the idea of justice, but be balanced against the actual life of the state.

The ironic elements in Plato's *Republic* are also illustrated in the course of development of the dialogue. The discussion about ideal justice begins with a critique of legal positivism, which claims that the righteous and just should be defined in terms of power, i.e., that the one who has the power decides what is fair. Socrates does not want to be involved in the dialogue, but is provoked to criticize this view, and he wants to show that justice as such is good, even though he does not yet know the content of the concept of justice. He then decides to drive the defense of the concept of justice ad absurdum in order to show the characteristics of the political. Later in the discussion of the guardians of the state, he points out the difference between the Eros and the idea of justice. In the ideal state, there is no room for eroticism and love, because sexuality is determined to serve the common good. The paradoxes of the State appear as follows: it should be the good and righteous state, it must be based on the absolute communism, but at the same time, the contingency and bodily existence is eliminated from the state, everything that characterizes the finite human nature.^[18] Man in mainstream political life would by his very nature never be able to feel at home in the ideal state.

In this way, one should not interpret Plato's *Republic* as a criticism of any political philosophy or as a defense of a political utopia. Instead, the book presents a description of the difficulties of thinking the best political regime, about the tension between the idea of justice and the concrete justice in relation to the whole, human nature and the state. The Socratic reflection can be considered as a reflection on the limits of the just state and the need to consider the justice in a realistic relation to human nature. However, according to Strauss there is implicitly in the *Republic* implied a different view of justice as the art that

on the one hand, gives every citizen, what is good for him, and on the other hand, determines the common good of the state. The purpose of the good political regime is to shape a state that follows human needs and thus becomes a healthy and happy state. In this perspective, Eros, poetry and wisdom could also be present in the good political regime as the realization of justice in the relationship between historical facticity, human nature and the order of the whole.

The best regime and the political reality

A provision of the best political regime that realize the impossibility of utopia, is according to Strauss found in Plato's *Laws* and Aristotle's *Politics*. Here you will find the essence of the classical political thinking that is far removed from modern power politics and ideology. Plato's late dialogue *Laws*, where Socrates quite interestingly is not present, contains a vision of the best regime that is not based on abstract idealism, but is about how to solve specific practical problems in a state. In the dialogue a number of experienced state men are involved who must reach a common understanding about which laws the state should have. They do not justify the good state by virtue of a social contract as in the modern philosophy of Hobbes and Locke, but from the consideration of the best state in a natural law perspective. Practical sense and understanding of the good order, not inter-subjectivity, rights, equality or discursive rationality is the key element for ensuring the good laws.

The premise is that man only can be happy in the state, if he lives by what is natural and good for him, i.e. by the telos of virtues. Where the wise philosopher is placed as ruler of the utopian state, it is according to the classical natural law the most experienced, virtuous and best citizens who for the common good, and by force of law should govern in the actual state. The virtuous and good citizen appears as the one who cares for the state's future. The good man is not just the good citizen, but the good citizen who govern in a good society.[\[19\]](#) To become a good and virtuous man, one must live in a good and orderly society.

The main characters of the *Laws* are the Athenian, Cleinias and McGillis, who in Crete are discussing what would be the best and most virtuous laws at the same time as they try to understand the laws originating in human nature. The theme is not the tension between man and state, but the practical matter of a formulation of state laws here and now.[\[20\]](#) It is the stranger from Athens, who begins the discussion. He argues that experienced states men at a long day may well find the best laws for the state, and so they begin to ponder about the basis of the laws.

Because laws have divine origin, you might think that they have been justified by a cosmology, but the point is precisely that the Gods perfection is not human, and that laws

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity - An alternative to the competition State

should apply to the earthly life. Another interpretation is that the laws have their origin in logos. Yet another possibility would be that the laws are derived from the divine and ideal perfection, but at the same time humans are using the ideas in relation to the human reality. One must admit that the divine quest is part of the Platonic political thought and that Plato did not completely detach natural law from the divine reality, and that politics has a divine inspiration because it is important to realize virtue in society. Therefore, there is no conflict between the law and logos, reason and its dissemination in the actual state, even if the law on certain points depending on the situation goes beyond logos.

This view of natural law can be compared to Strauss' analysis of the Jewish and Islamic philosophy by Farabi and Maimonides.[\[21\]](#) Here it is explicitly about a divine foundation of the law of human society, in which the philosopher has an important role to ensure the correct interpretation of the divine law. Although he takes the side of the Greek philosophy, for example, in his criticism of Carl Schmitt, Strauss believes that the theological-political problem about the law's origin is extremely important. This is not to ignore the fact that religion is needed to hold together the state, and the state will collapse without a set of values as the foundation for social integration. Perhaps the philosophical prophet who interprets the divine law can function as an alternative to the tyrannical clergyman and thereby mediate between religion and philosophy to ensure that there will not be a complete questioning of the state's Gods with potential disintegration as a result.[\[22\]](#)

After this discussion of the origin of the law, the question is who will govern in the actual state. Democracy is rejected because the mob does not have the experience and ability to take virtuous and right decisions. It is recommended that the city-state is ruled by a council of experienced wise men who take decisions based on the law, judgment and practical sense. Then is given an estimate of the city-state's actual organization in the classic areas: Education, production, administration, sports, judiciary and election of judges. The rest of the *Laws* are about how to regulate these things and not on abstract political theory.[\[23\]](#)

Aristotle's political philosophy in his *Politics* continues according to Strauss this project on the best political regime. Aristotle continues Plato's analyzes by systematically comparing the constitutions of the various regimes in order to identify their advantages and disadvantages. Aristotle's social science is at once ideal, hermeneutic and empirical.[\[24\]](#) Strauss says that for Aristotle, political philosophy is from the beginning the quest to find the best natural political order in any place and at any time.[\[25\]](#)

It is in a more modern perspective a question of finding the good life at the community level, to define what is good for a given factual political community. In this way, we must identify the community that is the best for the state's population. Aristotle criticizes more explicitly

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity - An alternative to the competition State

the notion of an association of citizens in the ideal state. The State unity must not be absolute, and the policy should not include all areas of life. A state is defined in the *Politics* as a collection of citizens with a certain kind of constitution for a certain time at a certain place, and this means that citizens' duties will change from state to state, from time to place. The ideal of the best regime is a series of links of friendship according to virtue, judgment and common sense to ensure the good life.

Aristotle also believes that the aristocracy, where it is the best, the most experienced and the wisest who rules, as opposed to democracy, oligarchy and tyranny is the best form of government. It is not whether you are a Democrat or non-Democrat that is the focus of Plato's, Aristotle's (and Strauss') concepts of the best political regime. It is rather about safeguarding the best decisions in a given political order, and here one cannot escape the fact that a democratic majority rule tends to result in loss of practical reason, because it no longer is the best that rules for experience and wisdom, but instead the mediocre. Aristotle criticizes democracy as a state where everyone is made equal, although they are very different in virtue and character. On the other hand, there can be traced an egalitarian aspect of Aristotle's thinking in the sense that the people who govern in the aristocratic state are equal and free. The government of the wise and experienced politicians can be seen as a limited democracy that can be translated into oligarchy or representative democracy, where the best people in society with practical wisdom discusses the state's goals and future. This virtuous aristocratic equality is not the same as exists in democratic demagoguery, diversity and mediocrity, because we are talking about the best citizens who are above average in experience, virtue and judgment abilities.

Practical wisdom and political judgment

The question of virtue and justice is developed especially in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle describes judgment and practical wisdom, which are the core concepts of classical political philosophy.[\[26\]](#) The purpose of the Aristotelian ethics is to think about the practical wisdom to form the elites who must be able to reign in the Greek city-state. For Aristotle, man is essentially a political animal, and he gives the practical wisdom great importance to the training of the aristocratic citizen. The aristocrat replaces philosopher-king of Plato, who in reality stands on the border of the state, because he would rather search the philosophical wisdom. And here the philosophical wisdom is on the contrary integrated in the good regents practical sense.

Aristotle discusses the *Nicomachean Ethics* the way to the good life, both individually and in society: justice, virtues and love of wisdom are pillars of happiness and the objective of the ethics and politics. Happiness is to live with each other in friendship in the just and the good

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity - An alternative to the competition State

state by the virtues throughout life. A distinction is made between the intellectual and practical virtues; wisdom, intelligence and practical sense towards moderation, temperance, courage and justice, virtue, practiced through the good and righteous deeds. Virtues as "Standards of Excellence" are realized through the experienced dispositions to act in a certain way. As virtue of deliberation, the practical wisdom is at once theoretical and practical. It must ensure the right action in the center between the city-state custom and culture, ideal justice principles and happiness.

The practical wisdom is about how to use a general principle in relation to the particular situation. Therefore, the practical wisdom must be thought of as an art because it deals with the arbitrary and contingent and not in relation to what is necessary as wisdom, science and intelligence. The good construction and the common sense of the good man is the political action art because it comes to applying the general principles of happiness in relation to the particular conditions. The Good Man follows the golden middle way virtue that implies always to find the right center relative to the extremes in a situation. In every situation the middle is different and virtue is reflected in the way the common sense is choosing the right center. In the practical reflection, the subject submits the will of reason to the detection of the right middle of the action, and the good man chooses from this experience center, the middle, and the virtue of moderation.[\[27\]](#)

Justice is understood not only as an idea of man, but as a virtue of action. It is applied directly in relation to the situation of action. As virtue justice is both proportional and egalitarian. You cannot treat unequal people and situations in an equal way. One should, for example, find the proper relationship between children and adults in order to understand justice. This fairness opinion of justice is based, as in Plato, on the fact that there are different justice spheres of society in law, economics, medicine, etc. Here, justice and equality are defined in relation to the natural order of things in that particular sphere, for example, the definition of the distribution of goods is not the same on the hospital as on the free market, and it is not the same goods to be distributed. It is the judge's job with judgment to find the right middle between the parties involved, and he practices the practical reason and virtue as part of justice. He seeks the proper distribution of wealth from the right proportion and balance conditions to avoid too much and too little. This ensures the good laws of the State, based on the friendship between the virtuous people, a friendship that also applies to the political life and goes beyond the life as a citizen.

Also by Aristotle, one can detect the tension between man and state. Man transcends the state and seeks true happiness in the contemplation of the world of ideas and the intellectual virtues are more important than the practical life of politics.[\[28\]](#) Strauss emphasizes the contradiction between theory and practice in the state as an expression of

man's dual nature. The ethical and political life is pointing beyond itself to the intellectual wisdom. Strauss says that political life is a life in the cave, separated from the life of light of cognition where you know the world of ideas.[\[29\]](#)

The crisis of modernity and classical political philosophy

Based on this analysis of classical political philosophy, the question is how Strauss can make an offer for the solution of the crisis of modernity without falling into flat liberalism or radical conservatism. As I said, modernity crisis is primarily a loss of practical reason because the thinkers of modernity in different waves have more and more rejected the practical wisdom as the basis of political thinking.[\[30\]](#) This crisis of knowledge has led to historicism and positivism in the sciences, which appears as modernity's two main philosophies. Martin Heidegger's adherence to Nazism, but also as already demonstrated Carl Schmitt's political philosophy illustrates this loss of reason in modern political philosophy.

The crisis of modernity is also a cultural and educational crisis.[\[31\]](#) The modern society has forgotten the virtues and classical culture as the real basis for training and shaping of the citizen to the state. The secularized modernity, described by Max Weber, with different value perceptions and different subjectivist conceptions of the good life has made it difficult to talk about a common good life as a guideline for state policy. The individual freedom is in contrast to the common good, and people do no longer respect the virtues of the classical political philosophy and natural law, but put an equality and rights philosophy against the notion of the common good.

It is against this background the big problem, how to avoid tyranny and the totalitarian regime and at the same time how to find the good regime of today's society. By going back to the classical political philosophy Strauss finds an argument against tyranny. He analyzes Xenophanes' dialogue *Heiron* as an attempt to show how tyranny is not an appropriate regime, because it is not a regime that can make people happy.[\[32\]](#) This dialogue between a tyrant and a poet shows that every tyrant will be appreciated by the people, but cannot be the because of his status as a tyrant. Even the tyrant is therefore happy in tyranny. The analysis is based on the question of happiness and the good life and on this basis it shows, that tyranny is a bad regime.

Should we thus draw some implications of Strauss's political philosophy for today's practical politics and political practices, it must primarily be made up with the widespread notion of politics as a power struggle and a party political dogfight. Also in today's political life, we must let our actions and opinions be guided by concern for the common good (*Res Publica*)

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity - An alternative to the competition State

and the formation of the best state (*Politeia*) instead of just wanting to secure its own short-sighted personal or partisan interests. Politics should not be seen as a confrontation of subjective positions where everything can be a basis for negotiation and it should be maintained there could always be a rational and virtuous decision in the political process. It is important to see reason and philosophical reflection as a basis for political decisions, as the best way to ensure the common good.

The reason for the crisis of the modern liberal democracy is also linked to the ideology of equality, where the political culture forgets the difference between the wise, virtuous and the vulgar. In many cases, it is the vulgar and tyrannical, who follow their own interests, rather than the wise, who are in power. To avoid this we need recognition of the virtuous elites as the best rulers. The importance of the liberal constitutional democracy is not the democratic process as such, but that those who govern take the best decisions. The elite is the experienced, sensible politician that stands in contrast to the impulsive, charismatic tyrant.[\[33\]](#)

A minister and a governor should be a person who you can trust and admire for his practical sense. One must be able to trust the minister's judgment and experience as decision-maker. This ruler type stands in contrast to the vulgar fool who has bartered his post to promote its own interests.

It is also about rediscovering and recognizing citizen virtue as an essential feature of a functioning democracy. Here the individual citizen not just follow their own interests but takes his responsibilities and his obligations to the community very seriously in a commitment for the common good.

Unlike many modern political ideologies that considers everything to be politics - included Carl Schmitt's radical conservatism that tend to assert that man lives only authentic in the political state of emergency - Strauss' philosophy includes an important definition of the limits of politics, which also can be applied to modern society. One never becomes a whole person if they do not live outside of public life with his friends in the erotic relationship, in the joy of the theoretical virtues, philosophy and literature. And this private life is also not possible without the good state and this is why the responsible and committed participation in public life must never be forgotten.

To reintroduce the notion of the best regime is a reaction against the reduction of politics to the economy and to the struggle to get the biggest slice of the pie. Instead, the political consideration, deliberation and action must be guided by a philosophical reason and conviction, based on an understanding of society and the whole of humanity. For example,

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity - An alternative to the competition State

social welfare, education and health cannot just build the economy, but implies a view of humanity and a vision of the citizen's role in the good political regime.

At the same time, politics must fundamentally have a communitarian starting point where one requires cohesion between citizens and the state and consider the willingness to ensure that cohesion as policy basis. In contrast to other communitarians, emphasizing tradition and the importance of culture in the community,[\[34\]](#) Strauss highlights as shown philosophical reflection on the good life and trans-historical truth in relation to the political life of the state as it characterizes a communitarian view of political philosophy. Therefore, every culture and tradition could include meeting with philosophy's critical distinction between quality and non-quality.

The political conservatism must however emphasize religion and values as an important communitarian foundation of modern society that can prevent social disintegration. Although "the wise" have understood that certain values cannot be justified philosophically, and are afraid of Nietzsche's nihilism that may in reality be the truth, they may not say it to the people, the ignorant and vulgar, who should preferably stay in their childhood belief in order to avoid disintegration of society. From the point of view of social utility religion, tradition and values are great importance to social integration - even if they cannot be justified philosophically.

Strauss' philosophy implies that the modern state must not understand justice as abstract equality, but always in relation to a situation. The concept of spheres of justice is important to include in the understanding of the welfare state, where increased differentiation makes it difficult to apply the same measure of justice in different sectors of society. Justice must be measured in the right proportions according to the context.[\[35\]](#)

Distribution of goods happens in relation to the various concepts of equity in the different spheres of justice. And there is the possibility to develop a complex equality, in which each person is assigned goods with respect to his nature and needs. For example, we can mention special education, health care and honors or services for the virtuous and talented in society.

This is also a criticism of a realistic and positivistic legal understanding that considers law as a function of power and perceive any argument for a particular law as subjective and ideological. Instead, we must restore political judgment as central in the judicial and political decision-making. Judgement was expelled as unscientific by legal realism that wanted to ensure the scientific objectivity and application of rules. Instead, following Strauss we should make the decision guided by an understanding of the nature and

wholeness. At the same time, there is need for expansion of the sources of law to better include philosophical beliefs, culture, custom and tradition. Judgement presupposes a truth about the individual case, its nature as it is the good politician's and lawmaker's task to bring this to light.

One way to retrain today's citizen to have and exercise judgment, is the concept of "Liberal Education",[\[36\]](#) which could address training in classical formation and introduction to the European cultural heritage as an integral part of the education system. At the university, this could for example mean that not only students at the faculty of humanities, but also lawyers, economists, doctors, scientists and future decision-makers got a broader cultural and educational formation. Such a "*Bildung*" would put them in a position to take more informed decisions, which would be rooted in a view of humanity and imply a conception of the common good. With this we could achieve a higher standard of virtue as the basis for a better society that might help to realize Strauss' aristocratic ideals as an alternative to the contemporary competition state.

Endnotes

[\[1\]](#) Francis Fukuyama: *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York (1989). This is the book where Fukuyama argues that economic liberalism with the end of the cold war has led to the end of history has replaced the political war of ideologies in the struggle of universal history. Instead, liberal democracy has been the dominant ideology with no real alternative.

[\[3\]](#) Heinrich Meier: *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts: Vier Kapitel zur Unterscheidung Politischer Theologie und Politischer Philosophie*, Stuttgart, (1994): Verlag J.B.Metzler.

[\[4\]](#) Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1959), Chicago: Glencoe Press p. 143

[\[5\]](#) Ibid p. 25

[\[6\]](#) Leo Strauss: *De la Tyrannie*, (1954), Paris: Gallimard p. 46

[\[7\]](#) Ibid p. 4

[\[8\]](#) Ibid p. 24

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity - An
alternative to the competition State

[9] Leo Strauss: *Droit naturel et histoire*, (1954) Paris: Plon p. 34.

[10] Ibid p. 50

[11] Ibid p. 23

[12] Leo Strauss: *The City and Man*, (1964), Chicago: *La cité et l'homme*, (1984), Paris: Agora. pp. 145-46.

[13] Leo Strauss: *Droit naturel et histoire*, (1954) Paris: Plon p. 137

[14] Drew A. Hyland: "The Irony of Plato's Republic", *Révue de Métaphysique et morale*, Paris (1991): PUF. According to Hyland it is human nature that is the source of irony because the erotic in human nature is in tension with the world of ideas.

[15] Leo Strauss: *The City and Man*, (1964), Chicago: French Translation: *La cité et l'homme*, (1984), Paris: Agora. p. 161.

[16] A good example is Sir Karl Poppers critical Plato-interpretation in *The Open Society and its enemies*, London (1946): Routledge. Here Plato is characterized as the father of all totalitarianism.

[17] Leo Strauss: *The City and Man*, (1964), Chicago: French Translation: *La cité et l'homme*, (1984), Paris: Agora. p. 163.

[18] Ibid. p. 163

[19] Leo Strauss: *Droit naturel et histoire*, (1954) Paris: Plon p. 126-139.

[20] Leo Strass: *The Argument and Action of Plato's Laws* (1973), Chicago: University of Chicago Press p. 42.

[21] Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Chicago (1959): Glencoe Press.

[22] In Socrates' *Apology* this issue is discussed. The philosopher is persecuted by the state, because he will not accept its gods. According to Strauss, this is a modern problem. Nietzsche was persecuted because he pointed out that the gods do not exist. The lack of faith in the state's values is serious because it ultimately leads to the dissolution of the state. Drury argues in this context that Strauss should be construed as a conservative who has discovered Nietzsche's truth about the absence of God and morality in the state. The

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity - An alternative to the competition State

philosopher does not care. He does not see this as a political problem, but for the wise and experienced politician and a good man to govern the state this becomes a problem. He cannot tell the truth to the people, for it would lead to the dissolution of the state. It is therefore the hallmark of the conservative position that it from the point of view of social utilitarianism is very keen to keep religion as a basis for the state. Shada B. Drury: *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (1988), London: Macmillan.

[23] Leo Strass, *The Argument and Action of Plato's Laws* (1973), Chicago: University of Chicago Press p. 38.

[24] S. Salkever: "Aristotle's Social Science" , *Political Theory*, Vol 9, no. 4, (1987), New York: Sage Publications.

[25] Leo Strauss: *The City and Man*, (1964), Chicago: French translation: *La cité et l'homme*, (1984), Paris: Agora. p. 28.

[26] Aristoteles, *Den nikomakiske Etik*, French translation, Tricot: *Ethique à Nicomaque*, (1987), Paris: Vrin, p. 75.

[27] *ibid* s. 220.

[28] Malgan: "Aristotle and the Value of Political Participation", *Political Theory*, Vol 18, no. 2.

[29] Leo Strauss: *The City and Man*, (1964), Chicago: *La cité et l'homme*, (1984), Paris: Agora. p. 43.

[30] Leo Strauss: " Three Waves of Modernity" in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy, Ten Essays by Leo Strauss* (1989): Detroit: Wayne State University Press p. 82.

[31] Allan Bloom: *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), New York: Touchstone. In this book continues Bloom Strauss' project by making a cultural, critical, intellectual aristocracy analysis of American society, and Bloom considers how consumption-ideology, value nihilism and relativism has destroyed American intellectual life and university system.

[32] Leo Strauss, *De la Tyrannie*, Paris 1954: Gallimard.

[33] Here it seems that Strauss is inspired by Max Weber's discussion of charismatic identity and the possibility of a plebiszitär-charismatic domination, where the good manager is opposed to the colorless bureaucrat who heads the government. Weber was worried about

Classical Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity - An alternative to the competition State

that the Weimar Republic because of its constitution could get such a leader. An example of where time is de Gaulle's status as France's president. See also Max Weber: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tübingen (1972): J.B.C Mohr., p. 141.

[34] Alistair MacIntyre: *After Virtue*, London (1981): Duckwood.

[35] Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, New York 1983: Blackwell

[36] Allan Bloom: *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), New York: Touchstone.

Share this:

- [Share](#)